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## ***Advance reform agenda at HHS***

**G**ov. Mark Sanford's recent appointment of a new director for the state Department of Health and Human Services should answer, at least in part, two prominent critics who complained about the lack of leadership at the agency.

House Speaker Bobby Harrell and Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer urged the governor to appoint the director in mid-July. Rep. Harrell said greater accountability could reduce waste at HHS.

Gov. Sanford announced last week that Emma Forkner, a nurse and retired Air Force colonel, would take over the reins at HHS. A Dillon native, Ms. Forkner currently is a policy analyst in health issues at a non-profit research institute in Texas.

The governor has filled the leadership gap at the agency, but there's more to be done for accountability and cost savings. Rep. Harrell can play a role by following the advice of the Legislative Audit Council and advocating a merger of related operations at eight agencies under the Cabinet-level HHS.

The LAC concluded in a 2003 report that merging programs for health and social services would streamline operations and save the taxpayers an estimated \$26 million in the first year by reducing duplication.

Agencies with overlapping programs include the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, the Commission for the Blind, the Department of Health

and Environmental Control, the Vocational Rehabilitation Department, the Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services, and the Department of Disabilities and Special Needs. (The environmental component of DHEC would be administered elsewhere.)

Unfortunately, the Legislature has been reluctant to advance government restructuring that gives the state's chief executive more authority. Five of the agencies recommended for merger with HHS are still controlled by appointed boards and commissions. Because they are not in the governor's Cabinet, "there is no single point of accountability for their performance," the LAC said.

The LAC found the various social services agencies characterized by a "fragmented organization structure" that resulted in waste, administrative duplication and diminished service for clients.

"If programs with similar services were consolidated into fewer agencies, under the authority of a single Cabinet secretary, obtaining help from state government would be made less complex," the audit concludes.

Only the Legislature can advance the reorganization agenda recommended by the LAC. Rep. Harrell demonstrated his leadership ability with the reform of the state Department of Transportation last session. The speaker should continue the reorganization of state government by working for a merger of health and social services programs under a single Cabinet agency next session.